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Issue 6.2 (Winter 2017) – Not a Trump Issue

## Rage Grief Comfort &

### Spatula&Barcode

**ABSTRACT** Documentation and analysis by Laurie Beth Clark and Michael Peterson of a project by the arts collective Spatula&Barcode: In December 2016 a major city building in Madison, Wisconsin was closed for renovation, and enterprising curators installed a massive temporary art exhibition, titled *Municipal*. As the community was in the midst of processing the presidential election results, we created *Rage Grief Comfort &* with the explicit aim of moving participants through and past their immediate emotions.

### Actions

In December 2016 a major city building in Madison, Wisconsin was closed for renovation, and enterprising curators installed a massive temporary art exhibition, titled [\*Municipal\*](#). As the community was in the midst of processing the heartbreaking and horrifying election results, we created *Rage Grief Comfort &* with the explicit aim of moving participants through and past their immediate emotions.



Photo by Clark Peterson

*Rage Grief Comfort &* involved four components.

1. Participants were invited to throw a ripe tomato against a plastic-covered wall labeled "rage."



Photo by Clark Peterson

This required that we first ripen several hundred (out of season) tomatoes. This was the scene in our dining room for two weeks leading up to the show.

It turns out that this is actually a very difficult gesture to photograph. Here are some images that do not do justice to the carnivalesque scene, the satisfying thud, or the messy residue.



2. At a nearby table, we sliced onions together to bring out our grief.



Photo by Clark Peterson

3. Then we peeled, cooked, and mashed potatoes to make a classic comfort food.



Photo by Clark Peterson

4. To us, the fourth element was the most crucial: as they left, we gave each participant a sugar cookie baked in the shape of an ampersand, and invited them to think about



what engagement and activism would come after their emotions and their comfort.



Photo by Clark Peterson



Photo by Clark Peterson

Hundreds of participants threw tomatoes and accepted cookies. We gathered the tomatoes to make "simmering rage" and fed all the food to the artists and volunteers as

they de-installed the show.



Photo by Clark Peterson

## Reflections

As the arts collective [Spatula&Barcode](#), we produced *Rage Grief Comfort &* in response to what we saw as our communities' need both to feel intensely the emotions in our title and to recognize and act on realities beyond and behind those feelings.

We've been making art as Spatula&Barcode for ten years and in that time created dozens of projects. What started off as a fun and decidedly light-hearted exploration of sociality and conversation has expanded to include works commissioned to affect specific communities and works designed by us to explore our own concerns. Past projects have investigated travel, tourism, climate, urban space, academic time, and, most recently, "Foodways" in locations in Germany, Australia, and the United States. While much of our solo work is "political," and our collaborative work has always merged criticality with hospitality and pursued what we hope is a pro-social and communitarian "slow" politics, *Rage Grief Comfort &* was our first work to make (implicit) reference to an immediate, "capital P" political situation.

Three themes emerged in our reflections on *Rage Grief Comfort &*: affect, waste, and generosity.

While our experience with *Rage Grief Comfort &* left us convinced of the value of affective, and even "deflective" artworks, we also realized that feelings of shock and outrage are limited in their political impact. There were no direct references to the regime change in our project, but almost every participant chuckled knowingly or made a topical comment as they took up a tomato. While clearly an explicit contextualization was unnecessary for the piece to "work," we also felt we wanted our space, in this repurposed public building, to be in some way apart from the noise of political media. In this sense, for us it was "not a Trump issue."

The sense of rage that we felt from many directions was almost inchoate, and while we didn't conceive of the work as explicitly therapeutic, we did conceive of it as a "working through" of affective experience that could otherwise be counterproductive. One of our private slogans for the work was "feel what you're feeling, decide what you're doing." Nonetheless, we were taken aback at the violent satisfaction that some took in enacting the first gesture of the piece—and some of those folks didn't bother to move through our other "stages." As the day wore on, we became more insistent about pursuing the

conversation around the meaning of the cookies; we felt it important to insist that at least *contemplating* action needed to follow on indulging in affect.

The ampersand is a part of our group identity and semi-ironic brand. In this project, we think of this ampersand as a reference to all the other work we are all already doing, making commitments to do, and will have to do when our needs for social justice cannot be realized through existing institutions. Like many of our participants, we experience our national and global politics as in many ways “broken,” and as constructed in the first place to serve narrow, elite interests. While we can’t ignore existing systems (to the contrary, we must pressure them more intensely), the ampersand signifies to us both the common (and futile) expectation that self-righteousness be rewarded (as in the “you deserve a cookie” [meme](#)) and as a literal reminder of the work that comes after this particular moment of pleasure and togetherness. The ampersand indicates that the cookie is not enough.

Another facet of the Municipal show that surprised us was participants’ concern that the tomatoes might be “wasted.” It’s not only that Michael was positioned in the midst of our project processing tomatoes into sauce, boiling and mashing potatoes, and caramelizing onions, nor the fact that we as a collective are known for feeding our audiences. Rather, it’s the fact that no one questioned any other resource expenditures of this (or as far as we know) any other project in the show. From other work we’ve done, we’re well aware that food waste is a unique issue that brings out anxiety, guilt, and righteousness. Moreover, we’re well aware that artmaking itself is often considered wasteful expenditure and that the confluence of art and food is particularly vulnerable to such critiques. However, we think it’s a mistake to unquestioningly bow to critiques of “waste” or assumptions that food waste in particular is either especially problematic or especially easy to remedy. In fact, one thread of our recent Foodways projects focused on developing a more nuanced and systems-based understanding of waste.

Finally, we want to contemplate the generosity and hospitality that underwrite this and all of Spatula&Barcode’s projects. Participants often thank us for our work; they experience it as a gift, and *Rage Grief Comfort &* was about giving experience, space, conversation, and a cookie. Volunteers gave freely of their time and both physical and emotional effort as well. It was the context of the show, “Municipal” that threw into relief the elements of gratuity and generosity that some feel can be found in all cultural production (our touchstone for these ideas has long been Lewis Hyde’s influential book *The Gift*). The whole experience was infused with acts of free and even purposeless giving, involving the city, the community, the organizers, the artists.

## Afterlife

Explorations of the political potential of generosity are at the heart of our next phase of our projects, both scholarly and creative. For example, we are editing a volume of the journal of *Performance Research* on the theme “On Generosity.” We believe that pursuing diverse aims that might be seen as involving generosity (from welcoming refugees into our communities to cancelling student loans and other forms of debt) is central to refusing the neoliberal politics of the 45th U.S. presidency, just as it will be in our responses to the impact of our rapidly changing climate and our rapidly deteriorating social safety net. We hope that the *Rage Grief Comfort &* project serves to model—and reward—generosity.

One of the most satisfying parts of creating *Rage Grief Comfort &* has been its recurrence in new contexts. The project has been taken up by others and restaged in the open source format for which it was intended. It’s circulating now as part of a project by the Boston-based [Design Studio for Social Innovation](#) (DS4SI) in their [Social Emergency Response Center](#) (SERC) kit. According to DS4SI:

SERCs are temporary, emergent, and creative pop-up spaces co-led by activists and artists around the US. They function as both an artistic gesture and a practical solution. As such, they aim to find the balance between the two, answering questions like: How will we feed people—and their hunger for justice? How will we create a shelter—where it’s safe to bring your whole damn self? What will reconstruction—of civil society—look like?

This project by DS4SI was actually in the works before the election, but the concept of a Social Emergency Response Center took on new meanings on November 8, 2017. But as activist Kenneth Bailey (and many others) point out, “The social emergency was already here.” The SERC is a rich and complex response to ongoing societal inequities and we are honored to be able to include this poster as part of the kit that is sent out to participants:

<p>rage</p> <p>grief</p> <p>comfort</p> <p>&amp;</p>	<p><b>Rage</b> Cover a wall with plastic sheeting, draped into clean containers. Give each participant a ripe tomato to throw. Collect and cook gently to make "simmering rage."</p> <p><b>Comfort</b> Ask folks to help peel and cut potatoes. Boil, mash, and serve with onions and/or gravy for a basic comfort food.</p>	<p><b>Grief</b> Get a really lot of onions. Invite participants to peel and chop. Cook very slowly to caramelize and sweeten your grief.</p> <p><b>&amp;</b> Give each participant an "&amp;" cookie; ask them to think about what they are doing beyond processing their rage, grief, and need for comfort.</p>
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*Ampersand Cookies:*

Any good rolled cookie recipe will do, preferably not too sweet and fairly sturdy. Press with an "&" shape and cut out in squares. The original "&" cookies were made with some rye flour and a strong anise flavor.

Spatula&Barcode developed "Rage Grief Comfort &" for the "Municipal" art show in Madison, WI, USA on 10 December, 2016, when more than a hundred artists moved into a shuttered city administrative building for a one-day community event. With the public, Spatula&Barcode processed hundreds of pounds of vegetables and gave away nearly 2000 "&" cookies. The leftover food was served to the artists the next day as the show was de-installed. Spatula&Barcode continues to distribute "&" cookies on occasion as a gentle nudge to process our feelings into action.

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We think that as the SERCs are imagined, there’s a place for something like our project as a way of saying “feelings, yes—now what?”

The project was also featured at the [Corban Estate Arts Centre](#) in Auckland New Zealand as part of [The 45th Landlord](#), an exhibition of “responses by American artists and organisations to events occurring before and after Trump’s inauguration.” In addition to posting documentation of the Madison project, gallerists in New Zealand also baked Ampersand cookies using their own mold.





Photo by Clark Peterson

For our part, we've continued to bake Ampersand cookies for activists on multiple occasions including the Madison Women's March, meetings of Madison's Arts Activism Work Group, exhibitions of Arts for Social Change, and other civic and political occasions.



Photo by Clark Peterson



We hope that publication in this volume of *Lateral* will extend our open source project to new communities. We consider the idea for the project, and especially the Ampersand Cookie concept, to be free culture, available to reuse or remix. If you stage an event inspired by this essay, let us know and we'll send you a Spatula&Barcode souvenir.

## Recipe: Ampersand Cookies

### Spatula&Barcode's Ampersand Cookies

This recipe is different every time we make them. The first base recipe had cream as well as butter. The cookies are not too sweet, and we've yet to feel we over-did either the anise or the cloves.

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Beat: 450gr butter + 450gr sugar

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Mix in: 3 eggs (~150gr), 50gr olive oil, 10gr anise extract

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Mix & mix in: 100gr rye flour, 100gr semolina flour, 600gr apf  
+ 20gr sea salt, 5gr baking powder, 5gr ground cloves

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Wrap and chill: at least 1 hour, up to 48 hours

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Roll out to ~1/4" or 7mm

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Press ampersands deeply with floured press

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Cut between cookies

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Bake at ~400F/200C for 12-20 minutes

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Re-cut between and cool completely

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## Acknowledgements

Thanks to everyone who helped us to realize this project: Trent Miller and Bethany Jurewitz for staging and inviting us to participate in the Municipal show; Andrew Salyer for helping Michael to bake more than 1600 cookies; Leslee Nelson, Marin Laufenberg, Helen Klebesadel, Sigrid Peterson, Dijana Mitrovic, Tracy Curtis, and Jeff Casey for making sure that our sharp knives were only used to cut vegetables; Cora-Allan Wickliffe for finding us online and inviting us to be part of the show in Auckland; and Kenneth Bailey for adding our work to the SERC kit.

[Bio](#)

[Twitter](#)



### [Spatula&Barcode](#)

Spatula&Barcode makes art projects in which the performance of place and of hospitality are central. Most projects involve conversation and some form of playful gift or souvenir ("swag"). While most Spatula&Barcode projects involve food in some way, their recent series *Foodways* directly explores the movements of food and food culture. Spatula&Barcode is a "social practice art" group that combines many activities in their projects: interviews and interactions, social media, photography, writing, and public events. Spatula&Barcode is the umbrella name for the work that Michael Peterson and Laurie Beth Clark make together, but they often say that anyone who works on one of the projects is a part of Spatula&Barcode. (Clark and Peterson are Professors of Art at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.)



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